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Résumé de l'article

La robe de mariée est peut-être l'un des objets les plus hautement symboliques de la cérémonie contemporaine du mariage. Chargée d'images de sexualité et de féminité, la mariée véhicule de multiples messages à travers la couleur, le style et les ornements qu'elle choisit pour sa robe. La robe en elle-même est un instrument de communication et de performance en tant qu'objet signifiant de culture matérielle dans le cadre de la coutume du mariage. Cet article examine la robe de mariée en contexte nord-américain à travers l'expérience de Nancy Harris, couturière. L'auteure discute des luttes de la mariée lorsqu'elle doit négocier avec sa famille, ses amis et les conventions sociales, tout en s'exprimant elle-même à travers le choix de sa robe.

“YOU JUST NOD AND PIN AND SEW AND LET THEM DO THEIR THING”

An Analysis of the Wedding Dress as an Artifact and Signifier¹

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The image of the white wedding is one with which we are intimately acquainted in North American society. One can easily conjure up an image of the blushing bride, in a long white gown, walking down the aisle on her father's arm, to be “given away” to the man she is going to marry. This socially constructed ritual is fraught with a plethora of cultural meanings, and can be read in a number of ways. The wedding gown is one of the primary characters in this performance, and says as much about the custom of weddings as do the words and gestures themselves². The choosing of the wedding dress, then, is an important aspect of the planning of a wedding. Possible styles are debated, every detail is agonized over and a large amount of money is spent on a dress that will, in most cases, be worn for one day only. Thus the dress is highly symbolic and is a predominant text in the examination of femininity, sexuality, and artifact in ritual when analyzing the wedding ceremony.

A salient point in discussing the role of the dress is to examine it as a text, and to analyze the bride as both subject and object. There are two key ways in which newer understandings of text can be applied to

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1. I would like to thank my informant for so generously giving her time for this article. This article has benefited from comments from Dr. Diane Tye, to whom I submitted an early draft as a term paper. I also want to thank the Women's Section of the American Folklore Society, who recognized this piece with the Honorable Mention of the Elli Kōngās-Maranda Student Essay Prize in 2004.
 2. See Adrian, Welch, and Foster and Johnson for examples of studies on the symbolic and/or performative aspects of the white wedding dress.

the wedding dress. The first is the idea of, “folklore as process, as expressive culture, and most influentially, folklore as performance” (Titon 1995: 434). Looking at the wedding itself as a performance allows for a unique understanding of the ritual as text. Furthermore, the dress can be analyzed as a component of that text. The dress can be seen to be part of the performance, participating as a character within the spectacle. Therefore, elements of style, femininity, personal expressiveness, convention and conflict all contribute various readings towards an understanding of this performative text. The wedding ceremony is a living, breathing, changing thing that can be read differently with each individual situation.

Secondly, a text can be considered as, Titon argues:

any humanly constructed object. In other words, a text need not be words; it may also be an artifact such as a painting or a building or a pot, it may be an action or event such as a ritual, and it may even be a person or a group of people. Text in this case becomes a key metaphor for any humanly constructed sign system, and we inhabit a semiotic world of signifiers that are not limited to words but include the entire human universe (1995: 434).

This expanded definition includes both the wedding as ritual and the dress as artifact as potential texts to be read. Likewise, they can both be applied semiotically to a universal human construction. The wedding, as a ritual, is one of a “series of passages from one age to another” (van Gennep 1960: 2-3). It is therefore, in our Western culture, a signifier of a number of things. The bride and groom are passing from a single life, at a post-adolescent stage, to that of a shared life, as “full adults” who will live together, raise a family and contribute in an appropriate way to the functioning of society. It is a rite of passage that signifies the break from the family and the formation of a new family. It is also a signifier of socially sanctioned sexual relations with the expectation that this will lead to children, who will eventually continue this cycle.

In examining this topic, it intrigued me to think about why the style, choice and purchase of the wedding dress is, in almost all cases, an exclusively female domain. In many contemporary weddings, the groom takes an equally active interest in all details of wedding planning: ceremony and reception sites, food to be served, layout of invitations, music, etc. Yet it seems that the one area in which the groom often abdicates all opinion is that of the dress. The primary responsibility,

then, frequently falls to the bride herself as well as other female members of the family and/or wedding party, potentially including the mother of the bride, mother of the groom, sisters and bridesmaids. In order to grasp a better sense of the role of women in the planning of the wedding gown, I interviewed R. Nancy Harris, a part-time hobby seamstress who specializes in wedding and bridesmaid dresses. Harris has sewn dresses for fifteen weddings, and had a great deal of insight into some of the power struggles and roles acquired by various parties during the selection and construction of wedding party dresses³. I will examine this information in light of the dress as an artifact, as costume in a ritual or performance, as communication, and as the primary means of a bride's expression of herself on her wedding day. These gender and attitudinal explorations result in an analysis of the wedding gown as the penultimate text in the wedding.

Artifacts can be read in a number of ways, and can reflect many functions and interpretations (Babcock 1978: 204-216). The wedding dress can be unifunctional or multifunctional, depending on the individual situation. The primary (and most obvious) function of this object is to serve as the clothing of the bride on her wedding day. However, the dress can have other functions. Sometimes the dress will be passed on, often from mother to daughter, thereby changing the wearer of the dress as well as the context in which it is being worn. Secondly, some brides elect to wear a dress that can be worn elsewhere⁴. This then parlays the gown into a dress that can be worn to other social gatherings, taking on new meanings and functions in each new context. Re-using a wedding dress, either by passing it along to someone else or by wearing it elsewhere is somewhat unusual today, since most brides opt for a gown so elaborate that it could not easily be transferred to another use. However, precedent indicates that brides in other eras were far more thrifty in their attitudes towards these dresses. For example,

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3. Because Harris makes dresses tailored to the desires of each individual, my discussion focuses on gowns that are made for the bride, as opposed to brides who buy their dresses ready-made. There is a difference in terms of the bride creating a dress entirely from her own imagination versus the bride who chooses from what is available on the rack.
 4. Women who want to wear their dress elsewhere often deviate somewhat from the traditional "white wedding" dress style. For example, they many choose a suit, or a dress that is not white. The other option would be a dress that could be shortened or otherwise altered so that it looks like a generic party dress.

1930s fashion magazines advised brides on styles of dresses that could later be adapted for other uses. Also, women throughout the twentieth century have altered, dyed, and changed decorative elements of the dress so that they could wear it for other occasions. However, perhaps the most interesting (and forethought) solution was that of the nineteenth century bride. Wedding dresses at this time were made with two bodices, one for the wedding and one for evening wear.

The skirt and evening bodice would have been worn until they were no longer fashionable, but the wedding bodice would have been kept virtually unworn, for sentimental reasons. Sometimes the skirt was cut up to make a christening dress when the children started to arrive; many odd wedding bodices of this period have survived without the accompanying skirt (Laverack 1979: 43-44).

This is a double way of using the dress again. The gown itself was designed so that it could have a dual function, and was easily changed from one use to the other. Additionally, the remains of the dress could be fashioned into christening gowns, thereby retaining the sentimental value of the dress while giving it a new life with a different purpose.

Contextual determinants of the wedding itself also affect the style of dress chosen. Harris related a situation where the bridesmaids of one wedding wanted strapless dresses (that they could wear elsewhere), and the church where the wedding was taking place forbade bare shoulders. Harris made a ruffle to cover the shoulders during the ceremony that could be easily removed for the ensuing reception (Figure 1). Not only religious restrictions, but also weather, location, family attitudes, etc., can all affect the look of the dress. The multivocality of the dress is composed of its shape, materials, size, technique of construction, colour, and design elements. In short, convention and context are determining factors in the design and construction of this artifact.

The dress itself contains both manifest and latent symbols that communicate to the wearer of the dress, as well as to those who observe the dress being worn. The artifact manifests itself as the signifier of the bride, and of the wedding event itself. When the woman wearing the gown walks down the aisle, the spectators are aware that this is a woman getting married at this time. Yet, "even when garments are used for a specific and apparently mundane purpose, we may find that the form they take is not always purely dictated by rationally appropriate requirements" (Barnes and Eicher 1992: 5). The dress, then, can signify



Figure 1. Detachable ruffles were put on these dresses to appease Church officials who did not want bare shoulders on the bridesmaids. (All photographs courtesy Nancy Harris 1997.)

latent ideas of the bride as an individual as well as ideas about weddings in general. The white dress symbolizes purity and virginity. Although those factors are no longer integral to the worthiness of the bride as wife, when the woman chooses to wear a white dress, those held-over Victorian notions are apparent⁵. Moreover, the style of dress reflects the woman's personality, and her attitudes towards her body, sexuality, the wedding ritual, and marriage itself.

The dress as an artifact can be seen to be both artist-centred and performance-centred, and it isn't until the moment the ceremony starts that this change occurs. While the dress is being designed, the bride acts as artist. Within the conventions of wedding attire (if she chooses to adhere to these rules), the bride has complete freedom. She can decide on the length, neckline, bodice, train, etc., to suit her wishes. Once the details are chosen, the dressmaker steps into the role of artist. He/she is the creator of the dress, taking ideas and turning them into an object. However, once the wedding ceremony begins, the dress

5. In other cultures and in the past, the idea of the bride as virgin was so important that often the family's pride and the woman's social status depended on it. Examples of this can be found in Urlin, Braddock and Fielding, among others.

becomes part of a performance in the spectacle of the wedding ceremony. This ritual is an extremely familiar one, with only certain potential variations. The dress then becomes one of these variables, enhancing the beauty of the bride as performer and acting as a performer itself. It functions in this way as part of the communicative process of the wedding, speaking to the wearer of the dress as well as those in the audience.

Finally, the dress can act as a coded artifact, as “a set of signals — words, forms, behaviours, signifiers of some kind — that protect the creator from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages” (Radner 1993: 3)⁶. These messages can be either intentional or a reflection of the subconscious of the individual in question. I argue that, of all the artifacts in the wedding ceremony, the wedding dress is likely to be the encoded one, because it is the one realm that seems to remain exclusively female-oriented. Not only is the dress for a woman and the group assisting the bride comprised of women, but dressmakers are a largely female group as well. Because there are rarely men involved at all, the creation of a dress can be a woman’s chance to assert herself and say something about herself, whether she intends this or not. Although convention dictates certain elements of the white wedding dress, there is still a great deal of room in which the woman can manoeuvre. “Acceptable” wedding dress styles range in shape, length, and other decorative elements. Implicitly, the design of the dress reflects aspects of the woman’s taste, attitudes and personality. She can appropriate “traditional” (i.e. patriarchally-centred) messages about women, and make them her own. This is directly manifest in the dress that she wears on her wedding day. Thus, a woman can choose a number of ways in which to use the dress to make a personal statement to herself, her future husband, her family, or her guests.

As a folk custom, weddings feature many elements. As both ritual and performance, the wedding functions both as a personal ceremony for the bride and groom as well as spectacle for the guests assembled. The dress, as a primary visual indicator of the nature of the ceremony, is integral in terms of communicating to the audience. There are a number of sayings related to the wedding custom. Regarding dress colour, the following poem dictates appropriate choices.

6. In this case, creator can refer to either the bride or the dressmaker.

Married in blue, love ever true,
Married in white, you've chosen right,
Married in red, you'll wish yourself dead,
Married in black, you'll wish yourself back,
Married in gray, you'll go far away,
Married in brown, you'll live out of town,
Married in green, ashamed to be seen,
Married in pink, of you only he'll think,
Married in pearl, you'll live in a whirl,
Married in yellow, jealous of your fellow (Emrich 1970: 18).

This passage advises the bride as to which colours are appropriate to wear, and which will bring her bad luck. Custom dictates that blue and white are the preferred colours, blue indicating truth, white conveying purity (Urlin 1969: 241). The idea of the white dress harkens back to Queen Victoria, but it is only since World War II that the white wedding gown has become *de rigueur* for almost all brides. Other common beliefs include(d) the groom not seeing the bride in her dress until the ceremony, the bride not looking at herself fully dressed until the wedding is complete, and a spider crawling across the wedding dress being a sign of good luck (Emrich 1970: 20-21). Perhaps the best-known saying regarding bridal ornamentation is "something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue" (24). This is a prime example of bricolage in the wedding custom, in that the bride is ornamenting herself in an array of items that come from various sources. Unless she is able to assemble this melange of objects, the wedding would not be complete and, indeed, bad luck might be wrought on the otherwise happy couple.

The wedding dress can be seen as the epitome of femininity. But what images of the feminine does it portray? How does a single article of clothing convey all these meanings? For most women, the wedding gown is perhaps the only clothing item that they will spend months designing and hundreds (or thousands) of dollars purchasing. The time and energy invested in this one dress is staggering and the creativity that can be expressed in choosing the dress can be immense. However, the bride tends to select elements of the dress from a limited array of conventionally accepted choices. And these choices fall within the traditional realm of "appropriate" female clothing.

Feminine clothing induces the body to strut about in small, restrained yet show-offy ways. Feminine clothing produces its special

feminine sounds: the staccato clickety-click of the heels, the musical jangle of bracelets, the soft rustle of silk, or, in an earlier era, the whisper of petticoats, the snap of a fan. And the finishing touches, the makeup and perfume, create a distinctive, sweet feminine smell (Brownmiller 1984: 79).

Typical wedding dress design falls within these conventions of female-ness. It is intended to accentuate the womanly shape, often with a fitted bodice, plunging neckline, cinched waist and crinoline-enhanced hips. She will also tend to accentuate one body part over another, emphasizing some and modestly concealing others (Davis 1992: 82). This exaggeration of the female form emphasizes the bride's sexuality, yet the white colour (and veil, if she wears one) underscores this sexuality by implying purity and virginity. Furthermore, brides often choose dresses that show more skin than they usually would, often by baring shoulders or cleavage. Once again, the hint of nudity emphasizes the woman's femininity (Brownmiller 1984: 95). All these factors create a duality that reflects an antiquated notion of marriage itself, that of society's bestowing its approval on the sexual activity of a virginal woman and her new husband. How much skin a woman chooses to show, how scooped the neckline, how tight the bodice, will reflect how the woman feels about her body and how she chooses to display it. Common advice is to "play up your best parts", or to "hide your flaws". By deciding on a style of dress, the bride is, in fact, making judgements on her own body, and parlaying that information to the guests. Contemporary bridal magazines underscore this idea, advising brides that, "maybe you'll find a basque waist that takes off ten pounds, or that you've got amazing shoulders that simply demand to go strapless" ("How to Buy A Wedding Gown" 1998: 970-971). The dress is a means of display. "Gendered dress encourages each individual to internalize as gendered roles a complex set of social expectations for behaviour" (Barnes and Eicher 1992: 19). The woman wearing the wedding gown, then, ostensibly embodies all the roles and expectations that society bestows on the bride. She accepts and displays these societal notions of marriage, the wedding ceremony, and of women and wives. The bride is often the focus of attention throughout the ceremony, and her clothing therefore is also the subject of intense scrutiny. While most of the critical discussion takes place during the creation process, the dress will come under praise or attack by the guests present at the wedding. Quite often, comments will consist of how well the bride has chosen to exhibit her body, i.e. if her hips look too big, if the neckline makes her look sleazy,

or if the beading is tacky. The woman's taste and judgement are up for appraisal through the style of dress she wears.

Furthermore, comfort is rarely a factor in selecting the style of wedding gown. While many women now will forego some amount of aesthetic in favour of comfort in choosing clothes for daily wear, this notion is often abandoned when designing the wedding dress. This can be attributed to the idea that this is the one situation where the woman can create any fantasy she wants, that this is the one day where she is in complete control of how everything will look and, assumedly, how the day will go. Therefore, "as a wedding dress was usually a 'dream dress', the wearer or maker would consider fashionable charm more important than suitability and certainly more important than comfort" (Laverack 1979: 45). Design elements such as bustles, crinolines, and fitted bodices all constrain the body, forcing it into sometimes unnatural shapes⁷. The comfort of the bride is unimportant compared to her looking like the princess, goddess or other ethereal being she dreams of resembling on her wedding day. When looking at photographs of the various dresses that Harris created for her clients, it was evident that many of these brides chose dresses that fell within this realm. They selected gowns that either gave a princess look, or what might be called a "meringue dress" (Harris 1997). As one bride wrote to Nancy in a thank you note, "without you, I couldn't have been Cinderella for a day". The focus on the dress as the visual manifestation of the bride's childhood hopes and adult expectations for her wedding day puts an immense amount of pressure on the bride, the dressmaker and all other kin and friends who partake in the design and creation process.

Body type and dress style can sometimes come into conflict, as members of the decision-making party can differ in their idea of what is becoming appropriate and tasteful. This can reveal itself in any number of ways, as in one woman contending that another woman wear a gossamer, puffy dress, "a wedding-cake vision of conspicuous consumption" (Brownmiller 1984: 87). This may evolve from a bride wishing to re-create a fairy tale-like atmosphere, or a mother of the bride wishing her daughter to look like the sweet ten year-old girl she once was. In either case, this contrast in feminine imagery can be a source of conflict. Harris related one such incident in which a mother

7. Bear in mind that, although they may conform to and accentuate natural female curves, they will often suck in or push out various body parts in ways they are not used to being contorted.

and daughter quarrelled over the style of dress the heavy-set daughter would wear (Figure 2).

Her mother had this image of her in a sheath dress, fitted, lace all over, which would have looked absolutely horrific on the woman. But her mother was cutting pictures out of magazines, that, “you’d look good in this, you should wear this”, and the poor woman was just beside herself. And we came up with something quite different that looked very elegant on her and she kind of flowed down the aisle. But her mother regularly tried to exercise influence over what was happening (Harris 1997).

This situation epitomizes both this quest for appropriate dress, and potential power struggles that can ensue when the women in question disagree over what is stylish and becoming⁸. Differing notions of femininity and appropriate means of its expression are illustrated in these instances. This is one situation where the role of the dressmaker can shift from creator (of the dress) and observer (of the conflict) into more of a mediating role. Obviously, in the aforementioned example, Nancy made some discreet suggestions, working with both mother and daughter in order to produce a dress that both would like and that would be flattering on the bride. She moved from outsider to insider status in terms of the power dynamic at work.

This friction can manifest itself not just between mothers and daughters, but also between brides and their bridesmaids. Harris described the pattern of struggle that she has observed from women over the years of her sewing for weddings by stating that there is

conflict initially — there’s a little bit of friction where they find their territory and how far each can be pushed. And then some compromise takes place in the middle. But I think it would be fair to say that in all of the weddings where I’ve been involved, in making the bride’s dress or the bridesmaids’ dresses, that somewhere in the sequence there’s conflict. If it’s the height of the heel of the shoe they’re all nagging about, or who’s going to wear what colour, the opinions enter into it and I think it’s fair to say that every wedding I’ve done there’s been some element of hard feelings... (Harris 1997).

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8. Nancy also remarked that many times, it seemed like the mother of the bride was living vicariously through her daughter’s wedding day. This acting out of fantasies (whether reliving her own or fulfilling what was denied her in the past) can be a source of contention between mother and daughter in terms of how the dress will look and fit.



Figure 2. This is the flowing dress style that Nancy and the bride selected to suit the bride's body type, contrary to her mother's wishes.

Amazed at the fact that every situation created negative feelings between two or more members of the family and/or wedding party, I wondered as to where Harris felt that she fit in during these confrontations. I asked Nancy about this, curious as to whether she would intervene in these situations or whether she usually distanced herself from the conflict. Her reply was that she will make suggestions about style of dress if she can avert a glaring error but other than that, “you just nod and pin and sew and let them do their thing”. Therefore the seamstress needs to maintain a balance between professional labourer and occasional mediator, ensuring that all parties are satisfied, or at least placated.

Selecting the various elements of the dress allows the bride to express her individuality within the confines of wedding convention. Although there currently is far greater leeway in terms of dress design, most brides still choose a traditionally styled dress. As previously mentioned, each woman will have her own idea as to what is attractive and appropriate for her own wedding gown. Mothers of the bride, bridesmaids and other female kin also have their own notions of how the ideal wedding gown should look. It is when these women clash that the greatest kind of conflict arises. Nancy speaks of one mother and daughter who differed over a single element of the daughter’s dress design. Simply, the bride wanted to have happy faces on her wedding dress, which completely devastated her mother.

RNH: The bride had this notion that she had to have happy faces somewhere on her wedding dress.

KHW: And why is that?

RNH: I don’t know, it was just the two little two dots for an eye, a nose and a curved mouth and she just thought it would be really novel to have happy faces on her dress. When her mother found out, she gasped and said, “I’m paying for this dress”, and then you got this, “I don’t want happy faces on your dress!?” So my job was to put them on the dress and somehow make them not obvious. So what we did was a motif of pearl flowers on the sleeve and the centres of the flowers were a circle and I put the little pearl happy faces in the centre of the flower. The bride was just ecstatic with this and her mother came for the fitting and she tried the dress on and they were both very excited with the dress and the bride, in particular, because she knew there was happy faces on her dress. The mother passed the comment that, “Well I’m glad you didn’t put those on”, at which point the two of us started

to chuckle... And of course we had to show her where they were and they were subtle enough and unobtrusive so that was fine (Harris 1997).

The bride in question had her heart set on this one element that contravened what is generally accepted as appropriate wedding attire. This was an element of design that her mother, as a staunch believer in tradition, unequivocally opposed. The resulting dress could have been a unique statement of her individuality while bucking wedding custom. However, she chose (with the aid of her seamstress) to express her ideas through a more conventional means. Through designing the happy faces by beading pearls on the sleeves, the bride was able to individualize her dress with a unique touch. From afar, the sleeves looked as though they had delicate and elaborate beadwork on them. It would only be through close examination that the coding would be revealed (Figure 3). Thus the bride's implicit statement through her dress was tempered by contemporary notions of correctness and style. The solution was one that suited everyone: the bride had her happy faces, the mother was not embarrassed by the dress design, and the seamstress was able to make both parties happy with the compromise.



Figure 3. Sleeve detail of leaves and flower design, with happy face motif in the flower's circles.

This expression of individuality within protocol is one that is uniquely female. When examining the complement of personae in the wedding party, it is evident that the greatest variation lies within the realm of women's dress. As I have discussed throughout this paper, it is the bride who is the focus of the most attention; her dress and other ornamentation are subject to scrutiny and subsequent criticism or praise, depending on how well she is perceived to have represented herself and her femininity. Moreover, the bridesmaids are also in the spotlight. The style(s), colour(s) and suitability of the dresses will be examined. Do the flowers match? Do the dresses complement or clash with the wedding gown? Does the bride still outshine them all? All these factors will be taken into consideration when the dresses are on display during the wedding ceremony. Conversely, the men's attire seems not to attract as much attention. The groom will usually elect to rent a tuxedo or to wear an understated, dark-coloured suit. The ushers will follow along the same lines, also in tuxedos or suits. Therefore, the male half of the wedding party frequently looks the same. Small differences, such as variations in colour of tie, vest or cummerbund, may occur but, on the whole, the look is uniform. The men fall under the mandate of the "unmarked", that is, "what you think of when you're not thinking anything special" (Tannen 1995: 4). The men's wedding attire is unmarked simply because their dress codes are extremely limited and fall within the realm of normative male dress in general. It is rare that a man's suit will attract any amount of attention. It will rarely call into question his taste, personality, or even morals. Yet women's choice of dress is always marked.

There is no woman's hair style that can be called standard, that says nothing about her... Women must choose between attractive shoes and comfortable shoes... If a woman's clothing is tight or revealing (in other words, sexy), it sends a message... If her clothes are not sexy, that too sends a message, lent meaning by the knowledge that they could have been (Tannen 1995: 5).

Tannen's argument is one that can well be applied to the juxtaposition between male and female dress in the wedding. The women in the wedding party all reveal themselves as marked in their dress, makeup, hair style and other decorative elements. This presentation of self can lead to conflict in terms of the bridesmaids asserting how they wish to appear, versus how the bride has envisioned her wedding day. Many brides wish to re-create their childhood fantasies of a fairytale

wedding, replete with attendants who are also dressed in the same gossamer. However, in Harris's experience, "most bridesmaids just want a dress that they can wear again" (Harris 1997), usually implying a less elaborate, more understated style. Further complicating the matter is the fact that bridesmaids are usually expected to pay for their own dresses, thereby compounding the frustration at the attendants being forced into wearing dresses that they dislike. The bridesmaids' struggle to express themselves as individuals tends to be denied so that the bride may assert hers. The hierarchy of decision making is evident in the dress selection process.

The dress signifies a number of things. The colour will indicate the bride's attitude towards contemporary tradition. If she chooses to wear white, she not only implies the purity that is inherent in the white wedding dress, but she also states that she wishes to conform to what is considered acceptable wedding attire. If she chooses another colour, she makes an equally strong statement, that she is flaunting convention and expressing herself in a way that may not be considered acceptable by others who are present (Figure 4). Style of dress also signifies the bride's feelings about a number of things⁹. It can show how she feels about herself, as it can exhibit confidence or shyness. It can flaunt sexuality or demurely conceal, and it can emphasize the woman at present, or reveal the little girl at heart. While the dress as a sign can be differently read by each audience member, the coded messages embedded in the dress will communicate in a similar way to most.

And this is where the bride is both the subject and object. As the primary character in the performance or ritual of the wedding ceremony, she is subject. She has also taken on this role in the creation of the dress. It is the bride who ultimately decides what she will wear and, through negotiation, compromise and choice, is intimately involved in the design and creation process of her wedding gown. The bride, as the wearer of the artifact, dons the dress and is the subject to its object. She personifies all the decisions, the labour, and all the underlying ideals

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9. In light of my interview, it is important to realize that the finished dress is not necessarily exactly what the bride wants and therefore, not a fully accurate representation of herself. Some of the discussed conflicts can result in a dress that is somewhat different from what the bride originally envisioned, and therefore the dress might indicate the compromise that was reached. However, this combined effort can demonstrate familial relations, the will of all parties involved, and power dynamics present in the planning of the wedding itself.



Figure 4. This dress fits conventional notions of the “typical” wedding dress with one notable exception: the colour is a deep golden peach. This was the bride’s second marriage, so perhaps a white dress was not as significant as it was for her first wedding.

that permeate the dress itself. She makes it her own and it reflects her as the subject. However, once the bride dons the dress, she also takes on the role as object. Her very presence in the spectacle of the wedding illustrates this, as she (and the dress) becomes the focus of the gaze, the object to be criticized or admired. She becomes objectified in terms of her looks, and her marked-ness is evident for all to see. The dress becomes the primary means of examining her as object, and the two together become the centre of attention in terms of presentation of self. The dress, then, is a powerful means of communication. As Nancy stated, “the dress has to perform” (Figure 5). This curious duality leaves the bride in a precarious position, and might be part of the source for her agonizing over every detail. She wants to be perfect both as object and as performer/subject.

Besides a material culture approach, the wedding itself as a performance or spectacle can shed light on the role of the dress as artifact. Bauman describes performance as “an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of

communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience. The analysis of performance — indeed, the very conduct of performance — highlights the social, cultural and aesthetic dimensions of the communicative process” (1992: 41).



Figure 5. The dress must perform. This bride wanted a flowing train, so Nancy added the large bow to the train to weigh it down, ensuring that it would trail behind the bride rather than sit in as a puddle of fabric.

This definition provides insight into a way of looking at the ritual of the wedding. The ceremony itself can be regarded as one of society's most important rites of passage, in that it places a man and a woman within a legal and sometimes religious institution that sanctions the couple's actions, ideally for the rest of their lives. Therefore all elements of the wedding reflect those values and, by participating in the traditional wedding, the couple accepts and promotes these ideals. The wedding consists of recognizable elements of performance (Bauman 1992: 45ff). Situationally, weddings can occur in a number of places. The most common locations include a church, a city hall, or outdoors. Although a wedding might take place at an unusual site, other visual cues will indicate what is going to happen. These decorative elements may include flowers, bells, and bows, usually in white and/or pastel colours. Costumes usually consist of the wedding gown, fancy dresses for bridesmaids, and suits or tuxedos for the men in the wedding party. Other elements of costume include bouquets, jewellery, hair design, etc. The reflexivity of the performance is that it takes common signifiers, such as language and gesture, and codifies them into a familiar and understandable ritual.

The ceremony itself communicates all these things to both participants and audience. It is framed in terms of legal requirements and any religious ones that the couple may choose. This pastiche forms a ceremony that is almost universally recognizable. Finally, the aesthetic involved is of utmost importance, and these facts can sometimes undermine the spiritual and/or personal nature of the wedding. Agonizing over details of the flowers, the clothing, the table linens or the location of the reception all add to the ambience of the wedding itself. These are the ways in which a couple personalizes a generic ritual, and communicates a number of things to their guests. It indicates how they feel about tradition, how lavishly or frugally they wish to present themselves, and how they feel about each other and their future together. Much of the planning takes place between both the bride and the groom (and possibly their families as well). However, the design of the wedding gown still tends to lie within the realm of the bride herself. Thus, her dress becomes the ultimate symbol of her own aesthetic, and takes on paramount importance as her presentation of self.

From my research and the information gleaned from my fieldwork, the role of women in the planning of a wedding is indeed a complex one. The wedding, as a custom, is fraught with beliefs that embody ideas about costume and its role in the future success of the marriage.

The wedding gown is the ubiquitous symbol of the wedding, and functions in numerous ways. It symbolizes the personality and values of the bride, as well as how she regards femininity. Its multivocality and polysemy is expressed through its shape, colour, style and adornment. It can function as a counter-hegemonic means of expression, as the bride can venture beyond the expected, resulting in a creation that is entirely her own. However, this is usually tempered by some degree of adherence to conventional notions of appropriate wedding garb. The dress also communicates, both to the wearer and to the guests assembled. The creation of the dress, usually as a result of a collaborative effort, can reflect power dynamics between the bride and either female kin and/or female members of the wedding party. The conflicts that can arise in the design and creation of the wedding gown are indicative of all these elements. How they combine to conflict or harmonize produces an artifact that speaks volumes, and reflects both individual and societal attitudes about the custom of marriage.

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